

**Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel
Florida Keys and East Florida Hogfish
Fishery Performance Report
March 2024**

At their March 2024 meeting, the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council’s (Council) Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel (AP) reviewed fishery information for Florida Keys and East Florida (FLK/EFL) hogfish and developed this fishery performance report (FPR). The purpose of the FPR is to assemble information from AP members’ experience and observations on the water and in the marketplace to complement scientific and landings data. The FPR for FLK/EFL hogfish will be provided to the stock assessment panel, Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC), and Socio-Economic Panel (SEP) to complement material being used in the upcoming stock assessment and to inform future management.

Advisory Panel Members:

Robert Lorenz (Chair; Recreational/NC)
James Paskiewicz (Vice Chair;
Commercial/FL)
Scott Amick (Charter/GA)*
Vincent Bonura (Commercial/FL)
Dick Brame (NGO/Recreational/NC)*
Randall Beardsley (Recreational/FL)*
Chris Conklin (Commercial/SC)
Tony Constant
(Charter/Recreational/SC)
Jack Cox, Jr. (Commercial/NC)
Andrew Fish (Commercial/FL)
Robert Freeman (Charter/NC)
Richard Gomez (Charter/FL)

Fletcher Hallett (Recreational/FL)*
Chris Kimrey (Charter/NC)
Selby Lewis (Commercial/NC)*
Joe Mathews (Recreational/GA)
Randy McKinley (Commercial/NC)
Thomas Meeks (Recreational/GA)*
Chris Militello (Recreational/FL)
Paul Nelson (Commercial/Charter/FL)
Andy Piland (Charter/NC)
John Polston (Commercial/FL)
Cameron Sebastian
(Charter/Commercial/SC)
Todd Kellison (NOAA)
*not in attendance

Fishery Overview

Summary information on the FLK/EFL hogfish fishery in the South Atlantic region is available at the following link: <http://data.safmc.net/FPRAll/>. The summary presents an overview of several aspects of the fishery including life history of the species, stock status, and trends in landings and fishery economics for both the commercial and recreational (for-hire and private) sectors. The information was provided as background to elicit the discussion presented in this FPR.

Observations on Stock Abundance and Effort

The preferred gear for commercial harvest of FLK/EFL hogfish is spearfishing. A commercial diver from Cape Canaveral, FL, commented that since the 25-pound trip limit was implemented (2017), there has not been a significant change in abundance of hogfish in this area.

Recreational fisherman from NC, SC, and FL commented that, generally, there has been more hook-and-line effort directed toward hogfish in both sectors. This effort has come with increased knowledge and experience in effective methods for targeting hogfish, as opposed to the general

assemblages of snapper grouper species.

A recreational fisherman from West Palm Beach, FL, commented that there's more recreational hook-and-line catch in that area at depths around 100 feet, but not necessarily much direct targeting.

Off Sebastian, Palm Beach, and Brouard Counties in Florida, commercial spiny lobster divers have been more frequently also been catching limits of hogfish via spearfishing. These fishermen are observing an increase in the size of hogfish being speared. Off Brouard, divers noted hogfish are found in depths of 25 feet and shallower.

Off Ponce Inlet, FL, few hogfish are caught using hook-and-line gear.

Observations on Fish Size and Recruitment

A commercial fisherman from the Key West, FL, noted that the Bahamas seems to have some larger hogfish than in the Florida Keys. Commercial lobster divers in Sebastian, Palm Beach, and Brouard Counties in Florida have noticed an increase in average size of fish being caught since 2020, as well as an increased abundance of fish in the 14-inch to 21-inch size range.

Larger fish tend to stay deeper until the water warms; smaller hogfish are found closer to shore.

Observations on Discards

AP members with spearfishing experience commented that the 100% discard mortality rate for that mode of fishing seems reasonable. One of these fishermen additionally commented that if they spear and discard an undersized hogfish, they typically count that as their 1-fish bag limit and do not continue targeting hogfish.

Observations on Price and Demand

Hogfish is sought after at restaurants in areas such as the Florida Keys for tablefare. There is a very limited supply and low catch limits, so domestic hogfish are not highly available in fish markets. Occasional availability primarily comes from commercial diver harvest.

Customers have a perception that hogfish sold in the Florida Keys comes from there, but most hogfish sold in the US South Atlantic is imported from other areas or countries (e.g. Mexico). Stronger regulations about advertising "fresh, local" fish may educate customers and highlight the strict regulations on this and other commercial fisheries.

A recreational fisherman from Wilmington, NC, commented that market file prices in that area for hogfish were about \$30 per pound.

More pressure could be put on hogfish due to the reduced gag grouper catch and trip limits implemented in 2023.

Hogfish are not highly sought after by recreational hook-and-line fishermen.

Observations on Community Dependence and Working Waterfronts

Historically, hogfish have been socially important and a popular target species for spear fishermen

in the Florida Keys. However, reduced catch limits, increased size limits, and reduced commercial availability of local hogfish have lessened this species' popularity in that area more recently. This reduced interest was specifically noted among young adult recreational divers that would seasonally travel to the Florida Keys. Also, with this fishery being most popular among spear fishermen, due to shark increases, diving is more dangerous and fewer people want to fish this way.

Environmental Observations

As a shallow water Florida Keys species, developmental runoff is potentially pushing fish into deeper water. AP members expressed concern and frustration with the amount of coastal development and lack of accountability for how this industry affects ocean resources. Additional factors like recent algal blooms have also been detrimental to a growing area and number of nearshore species in southern Florida.

Observations on Management Measures

Neither sector is meeting catch limits for FLK/EFL hogfish. The 25-pound commercial trip limit makes this species not worth targeting from an economic perspective. Higher commercial trip limits may better achieve target catch levels.